

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF  
REGIONAL MENTAL HEALTH BOARD FUNDING  
MARCH 6, 2015**

My name is Cheryl Houston and I am a resident of Fairfield, Connecticut. Last year, I was encouraged when Governor Malloy said “Since the tragic events at Sandy Hook Elementary School, Connecticut continues to focus [on] improving the mental health system for all of Connecticut’s residents.” Despite these assurances, however, the Governor’s budget once again includes significant cuts in mental health services that further disable an already overworked system.

As a mother of two children with significant mental health issues, I know all too well that the needs of individuals and families in crisis do not disappear if care is no longer available. Instead, we are forced to seek exponentially more expensive services in emergency rooms as we desperately attempt to keep our loved ones from ending up in jail, homeless, or becoming a danger to themselves and others.

Last year, Commissioner Rehmer said “Our mental health system is strong, however, it is vital that we continue to engage residents across the state.” I share the Commissioner’s vision, and have been an involved community advocate for many years. I am President of the Fairfield Chapter of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. I am a founder of B Stigma-Free - a non-profit organization working to reduce stigma by fostering understanding and respect through education. And for more than two years, I served as the Fairfield Town Representative for the Southwest Regional Mental Health Board. In fact, I so believed in the work being done that I eventually came out of retirement to lend my skills and experience to the Board on a professional level.

Regional Mental Health Boards engage and empower diverse teams of volunteers who oversee and evaluate community-based outpatient mental health care. With one or two paid staff and hundreds of dedicated volunteers, including consumers, providers, family members

and community activists, Regional Boards raise awareness, identify local needs, promote effective models of care and offer independent oversight of area services. The Boards currently receive a total of \$584,000 through the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services, leading one Department official to describe them as “the best bargain in the system.” The program evaluations conducted insure that tax dollars are spent most effectively, and also enable the Regional Boards to pay for themselves many times over. Last year, the evaluative work conducted by the Regional Boards in conjunction with the Regional Action Councils brought \$23 million in federal block-grant funds to Connecticut.

In 2014, the Lieutenant Governor said “We need to engage *everyone* in the effort to identify and better connect those in need with services that meet their unique situation.” The Regional Boards offer that rare opportunity to “engage everyone” - including this concerned mother from Fairfield - and funding must be restored so that our collective voice continues to be heard.

In closing, I want to share that I am part of a support group for family members affected by mental illness. Every month, we share our stories, we cry, we ask questions, we listen and we learn...and then we go home to resume taking care of the person we love who has a mental illness. We are their family, their friend, their nurse, their protector and their advocate, but we cannot do it alone. The current budget destabilizes an already under-funded system of care, and on behalf of the hundreds of families who are part of the National Alliance on Mental Illness in Fairfield, I respectfully request that the Appropriations Committee restore funding to the Regional Mental Health Boards and other mental health supportive services.

Thank you.